

Stifle a Chuckle: The Fields of Kibbo Kift

Annebella Pollen, *The Kindred of the Kibbo Kift: Intellectual Barbarians*. London, Donlon Books, 2015, 222 pages, £35 hardback.

Intellectual Barbarians: The Kibbo Kift Kindred, Whitechapel Gallery, London, 10 October 2015 – 13 March 2016.

‘all the year round and every year at stated but irregular intervals the strangest nonsense-life breaks through the up, down, back, forth: a half-mad world skithers into the humdrum drone’¹

On May 25 1928 a ‘Kibbo Kift Cartoon’ stated: ‘What happens in a field in Buckinghamshire may affect You and You and You’. Outline figures are sketched sitting in semi-circle around a totem and banners. Tents encircle the gathering. Urban figures stand below, called from their pavement existence to another life. Why, and how, might a Buckinghamshire field camp affect an urban ‘You’?

The cartoon, entitled ‘Whitsuntide: the Kindred Meet in Camp’, publicised the ‘Al-thing’ of the Kibbo Kift Kindred, an Anglo-Saxon styled moot; it was reproduced in the 1979 reprint of *The Confession of the Kibbo Kift* (1927), by John Hargrave, leader and dominant personality of the Kindred.² The Kindred have been an enigmatic, minor presence in histories of youth movements, an offshoot of the Scouts, rejecting Baden-Powell’s imperial vision of youth culture, and noted for archaic ritual and striking costumes. Hargrave’s sense of the Kindred as his organisation, with him as undisputed autocratic leader, led to schism, the more co-operative elements splitting in 1924 to

¹ John Hargrave, *Summer Time Ends*, London, 1935, 114-15.

² John Hargrave, *The Confession of the Kibbo Kift*, London, 1979, facing 32 (first published 1927).

form the still-thriving socialist Woodcraft Folk. Hargrave dissolved his movement in 1951.

Annabella Pollen's *The Kindred of the Kibbo Kift: Intellectual Barbarians* appeared alongside an exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery, London, dedicated to the artefacts of the movement. Book and exhibition are brilliant pieces of work, setting the Kibbo Kift in a richer and more nuanced context than previous studies, and offering a critical celebration of an extraordinary episode in youth culture, design, dress and the evocation of English landscape. Pollen concentrates on the period from 1920, with the Kindred's emergence from the Scout movement, to 1932, after which it was transformed into a small force of political action, the Green Shirts. Modern uniforms replaced jerkins and cowls, and Major CH Douglas's economic philosophy of social credit, already a key Kibbo Kift theme, became the dominant guiding principle. For a full account of the Kindred's history, including the post-1932 period, Pollen's study should be set alongside earlier works by Mark Drakeford and JL Finlay.³ Pollen's emphasis on the style of the movement allows however an appreciation of what might have drawn many of its admirers in the first place (membership was generally in the few hundreds, including children and adults), and allows the movement to speak to the 21st century through its striking aesthetic. Pollen also allows space for what might appear now to be comic practices, and for the Kindred's sense of their own peculiarity; the contemporary viewer can gain serious appreciation by letting such things play.

Visitors to the Whitechapel Gallery between October 2015 and March 2016 (the Kindred had held their own 'Educational Exhibition' there in 1929) found a low-lit room, with colourful costumes (tabards, surcoats) and banners at once self-consciously modernist and archaic, the ritual paraphernalia of membership (staves, totems), a carved lectern to hold the group's extravagantly bound 'Kinlog' (with a facsimile for browsing in the adjoining gallery library), and photographs of Kin members camping, posing and saluting at various ancient English sites. Jon Savage, leading cultural critic and author of some of the most influential works on youth culture in recent decades, found the show

³ Mark Drakeford, *Social Movements and their Supporters: the Green Shirts in England*, Basingstoke, 1997; JL Finlay, *The English Origins of Social Credit*, McGill, 1972; JL Finlay, 'John Hargrave, the Green Shirts, and Social Credit', *Journal of Contemporary History* 5 (1970) 53-71.

‘a revelation’, writing in *The Guardian* of ‘a radical moment lost to history, a future that never happened’.⁴ Pollen’s combination of book and exhibition offers an exemplary exploration, restoring life to the Kindred’s objects and philosophy. Pollen makes the Kindred speak not through any forced claims for contemporary relevance, but by retaining, indeed amplifying, their peculiarities. The careful design of book and exhibition make Kibbo Kift no less strange.

Pollen’s book carries substantive chapters on ‘Movement’, ‘Culture’ and ‘Spirit’, with a concluding piece on ‘Resurrection’ tracking revivals and allusions in literary, artistic and musical works since the 1970s. The prefatory section follows one of Hargrave’s typographic tropes in being titled ‘?’. Pollen introduces the Kindred as ‘no ordinary outdoor enthusiasts’ (p. 11), indicating their difference from other scouting and woodcraft groups, and from the popular outdoor enthusiasm of the 1920s and 1930s. The Kindred rambled, but not like other ramblers. They camped, but differently. And one could imagine a warning sign at their camp entrance: ‘No Ordinary Outdoor Enthusiasts!’ Kibbo Kift fields, in Buckinghamshire or elsewhere, were spaces for a select few; spaces with a sense of distinction akin to those of another growing movement of the time, nudism, and with a similar care for, as a contemporary slogan put it, ‘dress reform’. Pollen’s account of the emergence of the Kindred as a movement emphasises its progressive claims, its principle of gender equality in membership, its attraction for feminists including folk dance pioneer Mary Neal, and its class profile oriented to white collar workers; here were people largely without private income, engaging in committed leisure while holding down jobs. If the Kibbo Kift were proudly elitist, this was not grounded in class snobbery. Hargrave earned a living in advertising, and Pollen valuably highlights the traffic in ideas and technique between Kindred and Hargrave’s day job; finance also came from his enthusiastic employer. It is notable that one wealthier prominent Kinsman, folk dance enthusiast and later organic farming pioneer Rolf Gardiner, who acted as ‘Gleemaster’, left in 1925, looking down on Kibbo Kift for ‘suburban idealism’ (p. 42).

⁴ Jon Savage, ‘The other KKK: how the Kindred of the Kibbo Kift tried to craft a new world’, *The Guardian*, 2 November 2015.

At its outset the Kindred proposed an internal structure of Lodges, with suggested names including 'Darwin', 'Handicraft', 'Tolstoy' and 'Geographical' (p. 102). Connection to geographical thinking of the time came through Patrick Geddes, supporter of the Kibbo Kift, who reviewed *The Confession of the Kibbo Kift* in the *Sociological Review*, a journal then promoting Geddes' brand of sociology, and which regularly featured pieces on social credit. Geddes hailed 'a movement of promise': 'What then is this? Nothing short of a new social grouping, and of so many sides that we cannot classify it under any one label, recreative or educational, ethical or religious, economic or political, and so on, since something of each and all'.⁵ Geddes would also review Kinsman IO Evans' *Woodcraft and World Service* (1930) reflecting on 'scouting and woodcraft' as vital educational force: 'nothing less than the vital emancipation of childhood, boyhood, girlhood, and youth generally'.⁶ Geddes had long argued that field geographical education might play a parallel role; Hargrave's fieldcraft was informed by recapitulation theory, whereby child or adult might enact 'primitive' stages of civilisation, thereby remaking the modern world. Geddes was one of several intellectual celebrity supporters of the Kindred; others included HG Wells, Julian Huxley, Havelock Ellis and biologist J Arthur Thomson, co-author with Geddes of the 1931 *Life: Outlines of General Biology*. 'Life' was a key term for Hargrave too, signalling a cultural movement informed by vitalist scientific thinking. A Kibbo Kift banner, gold on black satin, showed a sperm fertilising an egg, with the slogan: 'All Life is Life: There is no Life but Life' (p. 151). Visionary tautology marked vitalist movement.

Pollen moves significantly beyond previous accounts in conveying the Kindred's 'Culture' and 'Spirit'. Lavish illustration brings to light the striking forms and colours of Kibbo Kift materials. Here are bright tents, totems (to accompany the Kin name of the individual; Hargrave was 'White Fox', others were Blue Falcon, Old Mole, Blue Swift, Sea Otter, Phoenix, Dione, and so on), banners, puppets, costumes (including those for travelling Mumming plays) and the Kindred 'Mark', the letter K. From 1928, photographs were taken by Kin Photographer Angus McBean (Aengus Og, also the group's Holy Fool), later a leading theatrical photographer. Fashion, as well as

⁵ Patrick Geddes, 'A Movement of Promise', *Sociological Review* 20 (1928) 75-76.

⁶ Patrick Geddes, 'Scouting and Woodcraft – Present and Possible', *Sociological Review* 22 (1930) 274-277.

advertising, shaped the Kindred's escape from civilisation; McBean worked in the textiles department of Liberty's, from where he sourced Kin fabrics. Pollen's 'Spirit' chapter examines Hargrave's interest in 'Magick' and the occult, with an elite secret order of seven in the Kindred (with Hargrave at its head) nurturing arcane wisdom. Camp activity would often be preceded by incantations, and the territory of the camp marked by a ritual beating of its bounds, even when those bounds were obvious (such as hedges around fields). Such activity could be easily mocked, the *Daily Mirror* laughing at the Kin resorting to paraffin to light a sacred flame from damp wood. Hargrave's response was that yes, this might well seem ridiculous to a world itself ridiculous: 'we enjoy being ridiculous, and know why we are ridiculous' (p. 152).

McBean's images include several of Kin visits to ancient southern English sites: Silbury Hill, Avebury, Stonehenge, the chalk figures of Uffington, Wilmington and Cerne Abbas. One photograph shows a naked man on the slope of the prehistoric mound of Silbury, shot from behind, making the K sign with back and arms. Textile 'Banners of the Place' also showed such sites, and were taken on 'Wessex Pilgrimage'; a 'Folklore' banner, inspired by Geddes's ideas of Place-Work-Folk, was carried to the top of Silbury in 1929. The 'Kibbo Kift' name came from a dictionary of Cheshire dialect, meaning 'proof of strength', the group venerating lost terminologies for modern ends. Hargrave and his followers thus projected a visionary English landscape, though not in the name of nationalism, indeed their scale of affinity was the world, their ambitions no less than global. Geddes highlighted Hargrave as presenting: 'The vision of Mankind and the world as an essential unity in which regional patriotism can find its true perspective'.⁷ While men and women in Anglo-Saxon garb saluting standing stones might suggest purveyors of crude nationalism, and even scare the contemporary viewer, closer scrutiny shows the Kibbo Kift delving into English landscape peculiarities for an experimental patriotism countering that of state, crown and empire.

Pollen's fine book and exhibition reminds us of the labours put into such play, its standing as accompaniment to hard-edged political and economic philosophy, the joy and wonder felt by Kift practitioners; and that nothing much came of it beyond their particular lives. The Kindred can amaze today from having been a dead end; while

⁷ Geddes, 'A Movement of Promise', op.cit., 76

Scouts and Guides and Woodcraft Folk go on, the Kibbo Kift stopped with Hargrave. Browsing the facsimile Kinlog in the Whitechapel Gallery exhibition, while the original rested on its ceremonial lectern nearby, brought home a rather desperate self-importance, the 'Kin Scriptor' Kathleen Milnes ('Blue Falcon') dutifully recording an official history of events towards a world transformed, while the world wasn't listening. With the Kinlog closed, however, and with only 200 of its 600 leather-bound, hand-stitched, gilt-edged pages completed before the Kindred's demise, the movement lies open for reclamation, for Pollen an episode in 'English oppositional culture' (p. 11) to be given its due, for all of its costumes, theories, hikes, magic and banners.

If Hargrave is barely remembered for the Kibbo Kift, he is forgotten as a novelist, an aspect of him noted only in passing by Pollen, but one which can take the story into other registers. Hargrave's *Summer Time Ends* (1935), written when the emphasis of the movement had shifted from ritual camping to political action, tells, over 800-plus experimental modernist pages, of England month by month from one October to another, ending with catastrophic flood, and social credit as the answer to ills. The novel's refrain 'all over England' suggests an author tapping a national consciousness, sensing moods and forces others cannot sense, manifest in communal ritual or everyday routine. Hargrave becomes a general visionary, if generally unread. If the Kibbo Kift gave Hargrave a devoted movement to address in camp fields, or at ancient pilgrimage sites, *Summer Time Ends* projected his voice all over modern England. The novel can be opened anywhere up to its final page 877 for visionary anxieties over the workaday world, for snapshots of an England of unemployment, machines, romance, newspapers, politics, weather and business, and for Hargrave's setting of, and reflection on, his own passions.

Enthusiasm for ancient landscape features in the June chapter, with Druids satirised at midsummer Stonehenge, rival Druid orders clashing over who got there first for the sunrise; Pollen notes a 1929 incident where three carloads of Kinsfolk took banners to Stonehenge, only to find it already occupied by Druids (p. 159). The novel's Stonehenge also features retired Lieutenant-General Pilcher-Cobb, upset at the lack of solstice

solitude and the ‘idiots dressed up in nightgowns’.⁸ Pilcher-Cobb, first introduced in May, has antiquarian passion, including for the ley lines recently ‘discovered’ by Alfred Watkins.⁹ Pollen notes Kin interest in Watkins’ speculations on the ‘old straight track’ (p. 160), though Hargrave presents Pilcher-Cobb as lacking his own focused ancient movement: ‘people go wandering about / ... a lean old timber wolf of a bachelor, he just wanted to stalk the downs looking for old straight tracks / what did he do with them when he found them? nothing / it was an outlet for restless energy / ... a kind of boy scout activity, this old straight tracking’.¹⁰ In September Hargrave asks ‘what sent Pilcher-Cobb looking for long barrows’, for ‘old things that hold - hold the imagination’, and perceptions of strangeness intrude: ‘cromlechs, mounds / earth-magic (what a lot of bunk! I quite agree / I agree with you ... so easy to go to silbury / to come over all sarsen ...)’.¹¹

January brings a passage on folk culture, presenting outlooks which continue to shape commentary on cultural practices deemed to be, if not all over England, then England all over. Although the Kibbo Kift were more concerned with folk drama than song and dance, Hargrave would surely have had his own movement, with its rituals, theatricals, made-up names and sense of the serious-ridiculous, in mind as he described Robert and Sylvia, and their mother Lady Jordans, discussing a newspaper report of the ‘annual festival of the English Folk Dance and Song Society at the Albert Hall’. Hargrave’s narrator voice firmly directs the reader to the dancers’ virtue, to the serious ‘unbroken tradition’ of ‘ordinary unspoilt, working men’, but only in counterpoint to ridiculous conversation, and there is a sense that Hargrave may be chuckling too:

Lady Jordans said

“I do so *love* to think of the old folk dances being danced again – Bean Setting, Sellenger’s Round, and all the lovely old things – ”

“I know” said Robert “Gathering Peascods – almost anything you happen to think of makes a good title for a folk dance – Potato Peeling, Mince Meat, Shovelling Horsedung - ”

⁸ Hargrave, *Summer Time Ends*, 575.

⁹ Adam Stout, *Creating Prehistory: Druids, Ley Hunters and Archaeologists in Pre-war Britain*, Oxford, 2008.

¹⁰ Hargrave, *Summer Time Ends*, 491-3.

¹¹ Hargrave, *Summer Time Ends*, 729-30.

“Robert! don’t be so dis-*gust*-ing!”

“inventing names for folk dances ought to be a game for winter evenings -
Hiccoughs, Buttering Toast Crusts, the Pigswill Dance of the Piddleton Men - ”

“Nose Blowing” suggested Sylvia

“Spitting Out Plum Stones”

“I do think it’s a shame to make fun of everything” said Lady Jordans
but the new game was well away, and even she had to stifle a chuckle ¹²

David Matless

University of Nottingham, UK

E-mail address: David.Matless@Nottingham.ac.uk

¹² Hargrave, *Summer Time Ends*, 241-2.